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Women in Child Care and Early Education: Truly Nontraditional Work

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ABSTRACT

The field of child care and early childhood has been viewed historically as 'women's work' and shares the typical characteristics of low compensation, limited requirements, incoherent career ladder, and high turnover. The connection between women and children, rooted in biology, the sociology of the family, and the historical perceptions of men and women, perpetuates the idea that the care and early education of children belong to women. Furthermore, the conventional wisdom that by and large women naturally love and want to do and are able to care not only for their own children, but all children. This view describes the root of a pervasive problem, not just for persons in the child care and early education field, but also for the nation as a whole. At a time when the number of women, including mothers with young children, entering the labor market is expanding rapidly, the need for child care and early education programs in centers and homes is also growing. It is time to examine in more detail the underlying assumptions about child care and education as women's work and to emphasize the claim that such work is valuable, worthy and essential to the growth and development of children, to the health and stability of the family, and to the success and expansion of the nation's economy.

Key Words: Child care, Traditional work, Nontraditional work

INTRODUCTION

Child care and early education programs offer more than "child's play". The field serves multiple roles in the development of an expanded female work force and has a major impact on every segment of the society: children, parents, families, public/private schools, employers and governments at all levels. Child care and early education is needed for all children of all ages and categories and for various time periods (1). The level of quality of child care and early education is a serious concern, poor care is detrimental to children and quality care is expensive. Not only is it true that parents can't work without child care and early education programs. Parents cannot work effectively if their children are not cared properly- absenteeism, tardiness, reliability and productivity are affected by a family's child care and early education arrangements. The perception of women and children determines to a great extent the treatment received from the society at large, attitudes that tend to perpetuate the pattern of diminished value and limited

opportunities for resource allocation. As long as the field of child care and early education is viewed as traditional women's work, the characteristics of women's work will apply: low salaries, scant benefits, limited access to training and high job turnover.

Young women in urban India are working in ever larger numbers. Every 1 out of 4 women between the age of 20 and 34 years was working in 2016; compared to merely one in 10 seven years before, as per the latest data from India Human Development surveys (2). This is a remarkable jump in employment. The single most critical factor that will enable young women to continue working is adequate, reliable and affordable childcare. There is strong evidence from other countries that government policies that support early education and childcare increase labor force participation of women and reduces gender gaps. Traditionally, grandparents have been the primary source of childcare in India. Increased labor mobility in recent years has resulted in young families moving away from their native places. The consequent loss

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of proximity to grandparents means a loss of childcare as well.

Traditional and Nontraditional Work for Women

Child care and early education is defined as traditional because 97% of child care and early educators are female; women are the mothers who have had the biological and historical responsibility for the basic care of children. However, child care and early education and family child care are burdened by the traditional / nontraditional dichotomy. Working with young children is often perceived as similar to mothering and something instinctive and enjoyable to women. This view is perpetuated by government, the broader community, and, sometimes, educators themselves.

A society's beliefs are grounded on basic beliefs about the characteristics of human nature and relationships. Some assumptions in child care and early education to be examined include:

1. Women can naturally care for their children and the children of others and should do it with little or no remuneration.
2. Even women who have little or no education and work experience, little orientation toward the future, limited resources in the home, no experience of training for working with children in groups who are not their children are presumed capable of working effectively in child care and early education programs. On the other hand, it is also believed by many that women on welfare are not interested in or capable of working in the child care and early education field. Like most assumptions, neither is completely true.
3. Traditional jobs for women are viewed as negative: low compensation, limited advancement and high turnover. Traditional women's work with its many restrictions and limitations would require no pre-service and in-service training and education; there would be no reason to improve oneself if there is nowhere to go.
4. Nontraditional jobs for women are viewed as positive: higher compensation (salary and benefits), advancement opportunities (career ladder), and low turnover based on commitment and job satisfaction. Therefore pre-service and in-service training for the work is important and necessary. Women and the work they do are based on societal, familial, professional and personal assumptions. Women, especially poor women and mothers are silently expected to be dependent on a male, father or husband.
5. Related characteristics-Work is characterized by belief in the need to improve and expand commitment to efficacy and effectiveness, reliability, stability, business abilities, and to continued growth through reading and reflecting, workshops and conferences, courses and degree programs.

In the Indian context the role of women in the development of the childcare and early education field has been frequently invisible or minimized. Although the field was and is dominated by women, in the earliest days the founders and leaders were mostly men. Child care and early education has developed into a complex field in which multiple groups become interrelated over time in terms of long days and extended years (3).

With growing urbanization and increase in women's participation in the work force across the country among all socioeconomic groups, there has been a sea change in social structures and practices in the last few decades(4). A significant indicator of this change has been the emergence of the nuclear family, a change which has converted child rearing from what was traditionally a shared responsibility into the sole responsibility of the young parents. This responsibility is often further delegated. While in the higher income brackets children are often left with paid surrogate care givers, in the lower socioeconomic communities the responsibility of care giving get loaded on to the older sisters, thus keeping them often out of school and robbing them of their childhood. As a result, given the constant pressures and challenges of day -to day- existence in today's complex society, the possibilities of "informal early care and education" for the young child at home is becoming less of a reality. It was this changing social context, over the years, which laid the seeds for the introduction of the concept of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in the country.

Barriers inherent in professional roles for women

A women's well-being directly affects her family's and nation's health, productivity and stability in many ways. But often women receive little care and support, control few resources and at the same time shoulder multiple burdens and suffer many kinds of discrimination. The women who work in nontraditional jobs must rely on women in traditional jobs, i.e., child care. Nontraditional jobs require preparation and training and commitment to work in order to remain competitive and eligible for promotions. Barriers inherent in professional roles for women are as follows:

- Social/Cultural: Women are socialized for limited work levels, often have unsupportive family and friends, feel the negative attitudes of coworkers, lack self confidence and assertiveness, have limited experience with tools and mechanical operations.
- Education and Training: Women often have limitations about getting an appropriate education, knowing about advancement techniques, having support services (child care is always seen as a support service for working mothers).
- Paraphrasing Pogo: We have seen the enemy and it is us. That is, women themselves sell themselves short,

do not protest low wages and limited or no benefits, do not clamor and work for better conditions, do not make every effort to get additional experience, education and exposure to professional colleagues (mentor, teachers, etc).

CONCLUSIONS

As long as childcare and early education is perceived as a traditional field for women, some women will be restricted in or prevented from entering the field. The paradigm shift from traditional to nontraditional is difficult, even for women themselves. The resistance to, even the refusal to, change is largely because of the need to change attitudes towards power, control, comfort levels, taking risks and being liked, valued and cared for over against being disliked, devalued and abandoned or ignored. More needs to be done; we need to become advocates for providing opportunities for women's full economic, political, professional and personal development. Pay special attention to policies affecting women in general and low-income women in particular. Address multiple issues pertaining to the rights of all women's work and children's play. Explore one's own perceptions and expectations about work and about women's work. There is a need to identify and align with organizations that promote the well-being and self sufficiency of all citizens, including women and children. We also need to

contribute resources, energy, and skills to women work and children's play.

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